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of Chandramowly

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Leadership Competency Series

Why Smart People Fail?

People or organisations develop competencies to enhance their performances. In the process, they may count on a single competency, overuse it, and get better short-term results. But overusing a single competency may virtually bring to a standstill and raze long-term objectives, says M R Chandramowly.

ANAND is known for his action-oriented behaviour. He is full of energy and enjoyed working hard. Seizing more opportunities than others, he quickly moved up on the corporate ladder and now heads a team. Recognised as a “fast tracker”, he knew that he had to work hard to maintain his brand. Managing many things was a tough game of bifocal vision — focusing on the macro and micro of business objectives and business actions. Anand gradually started pushing solutions before adequate analysis. He over managed to get things done quickly and some times results messed up. As a perfectionist, he was worried about what people will say when things went wrong. Then he tried reducing delegation and did most of the things himself, expecting results to improve. But to his surprise, the situation did not get better. He lagged behind others in adding value to organisation, besides he had severe family problems due to disinterest and neglect.

Managing many things

Anita is marketing executive notable for new and unique ideas. She had a special talent to make connections among unrelated notions, seen as original and value-added in brainstorming settings. Her versatility was praised and she became a trusted executive to manage many things at once, and got promoted as a manager. Over a time, Anita seemed to get infatuated with marginally productive ideas. She got involved in too many things at once without following through behind an idea. Overusing her creativity, she turned out to be a loner and not a good team player. She failed to relate well with those who are less creative and her managerial capability was questioned, resulting in redeployment with role change.

John Paul, a senior manager in sales is a skilful negotiator and was known for his talent to manage tough situations with both internal and external group. He gained trust of the parties quickly to negotiations and exercised a good sense of timing. Always willing, he never saw failures. All key negotiations waited for his intervention and he noted that flexibility and delay got him better results. His tough stand on some high value areas was proved right securing orders of high margins. John hanged on to issues too long. With his zeal to always win, he seldom walked over people's feelings. Some times he was overly accommodating and was reluctant to walk away. Over a period, things did not go well in

John's favour and he had to look out for a change.

'Attention-importance'

In the arena of competency development, executives discover both by introspection and feedback, the competencies they are good at, which makes them successful and distinct from other unsuccessful ones. They also learn new competencies required to meet fresh challenges. In the process, especially when they are on top of their job achievement, they tend to overuse a competency. The gap between the result of incompetence and result of an overused competency is minimal. When we over use our competencies, which are developed over years, we tend to ignore the details. Moving faster catching up with the speed of the market, we may some times fail to look at the ground. Continued over focus on managing many things, which is the need of the day for executives, may damage overall results, when one loses the natural tendency of "attention" - the ability of thoughtful awareness towards a person, aspect or any thing. Attention or "avadhana". Some people are attentive only when things are important to them. If we must only be attentive to important things, how do we decide what is important? Without being attentive and aware of what is happening around us and how are we feeling about those external things, is it possible to decide what is important for us? Attention is human nature of becoming aware of what is happing outside of us, which trigger our thoughts within us. Our egocentric vision of things is not attention. Attention is caused by total voluntary involvement of all our five senses. If we use only our "common sense" for the peripheral macro view to move fast, ignoring the voluntary and natural convergence of our five senses of knowledge, we fail to give attention to details, missing many things, which could be important. Unless one is attentive, what is important cannot be decided. Leadership success is becoming more influenced by the people factors than other business aspects. A recent leadership success survey of Fortune 100 companies discloses that 40 per cent of leadership success depends on people management. Personal character, strategic management and process management take the next order of 35 per cent, 13 per cent and 12 per cent respectively.

Overused competencies

The research done by Lominger Ltd, Inc, the creators of the Leadership Architect, reveals that leaders overly use some competencies for no better results and some times, they end up in problems. The competency data surveying multiple people, organisations and groups affirm some of the common overused competencies and they are: patience, action orientation, commanding, planning, customer focus and creativity. One caution in competency development is to balance the use of competency to a fine degree to get desired results. Competency itself cannot win and produce results. Application of a competency is through our feeling, thoughts and actions, in that order. Combination of all the three must be used balancing our effort to create desired situation for winning. On getting few success scores in profession, managers tend to overuse their specific competencies only to get surprised at the negative overall results.

Wings on wheels

In my consultation work on competency mapping projects, I have noticed one emerging trend among managers to emulate a “key competency” of the boss. Moving around with wings on wheels, people do many things in bits and pieces, which make every one feel that they are super active and things are stirring fast. Mostly the big boss is always busy with hectic discussions which at that moment has became priority at the last minute, replaying mails to retain their attentiveness of responding on the same day, answering phones changing appointment schedules and so on. Some times the value “speed is the need” is overdriven with a single focus of achieving objectives. By mere emulation of “busy styles” one could lose focus on long-term success.

The latest neurological research has identified a new human deficiency, which has potential to become disease, called as “Attention Deficiency Trait” (ADT). Ned Hallowell is a world-renowned expert on attention deficit disorder reveals in his research showing that “the multitasking Babel of the modern work place is driving normal people to behave in ways that mimic ADT, causing the brain to respond in unproductive or counter productive ways.”

Competency bi-focal

Competencies define the critical skills, behaviours, attributes, values and motives that are essential for ongoing and long-term success of work and life. We display our competencies through our behaviours in our “feeling” “thoughts” and “action” to derive results, either to produce desired products or provide required services.

Today’s executive has two specific challenges. He has used his competencies to win over the current challenges and most importantly prepare and develop new competencies for the future. In the first dimension, he would focus on what can work for here and now. In the second, he needs to think about what new competencies he would require to face the future. By using this bi-focal approach, he prepares to virtually create a desired future.

Raw stinks if boiled less; over-boiling spoils flavor

Milk breaks if over-stirred; heat therefore with care

Likewise is mind's temper, guard it with great diligence

With moderation and poise, strike a balance with sense.

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